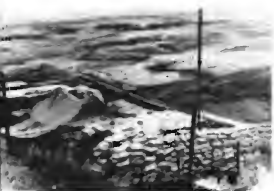


(U) History Today - 26 June 2013

(U) Commonplace today, remoting was an unproven, even bold, idea when it was first implemented.

(U) During the Vietnam War, although COMINT was a major source of intelligence, it often involved considerable danger to the intercept operator. Much of the enemy's communications were low-powered and line-of-sight. Because of the mountainous terrain and jungle, collectors often had to work close to enemy transmitters.

(U) During the early phases of the war, intercept units often were colocated with combat troops, which afforded protection for them. As U.S. forces began to draw down near the end of the war, however, many intercept sites could not be protected.

(U) As this was happening, NSA engineers developed a pioneering concept known as EXPLORER, appropriately enough. This involved placing remote-controlled intercept systems in isolated areas, often where there were small bases of friendly troops.

(U) In late 1970, EXPLORER was placed on Hill 950 in Military Region I, with a Special Forces unit of four Americans and thirty-one Montagnards. The system had four receivers, all of them controlled by voice intercept operators at the Army Security Agency field station in Phu Bai. There were no COMINT-cleared personnel on Hill 950.

(U) It was calculated that the time delay between an operator's command in Phu Bai, the receiver acting on it at Hill 950, and relay of the signal back to the operator was less than a quarter of a second. The operator did not have to know that his intercept receiver was more than sixty miles away.

(U) The concept was validated by the quantity and quality of the intercept. EXPLORER, within a month, was producing up to 2,000 minutes of intercept every day, making it the second major producer of VHF intercept in Southeast Asia.

(U) When the concept was judged to be a success, EXPLORER was upgraded to eight receivers in March 1971. EXPLORER II was deployed in February 1971, and EXPLORER III in December.

(U) The original EXPLORER site was overrun by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in June 1971, not long after the upgrade, as part of a general enemy offensive. One American and about fifteen Montagnards were killed. The Special Forces unit and its allies were forced to withdraw in the face of this attack, but, before leaving, they used thermite to destroy the EXPLORER system.

(U) Ironically, the loss of the EXPLORER site helped gain acceptance for the concept of remoting. Had a COMINT site on Hill 950 been manned, there would have been forty or fifty cleared individuals on the hill, and the human losses could have been many times more tragic than they were.

(U) The success of EXPLORER pointed the way toward future methods of intercept in dangerous or hard-to-support areas.

(U) The photograph shows part of the intercept site at Phu Bai.

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